

The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962

Introduction

This week and next we are going to discuss the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. You are going to view the film [Thirteen Days](#) (2000) before the next class on May 13th.

Another good film on this topic (a documentary) is [The Man Who Saved the World](#) (2012). At [this website](#) there is a bilingual English and Japanese transcript of the subtitles of *The Man Who Saved the World*. There is another film called [The Man Who Saved the World](#) (2014) which tells a similar story about a Soviet officer who disobeyed the rules and decided, during a moment of uncertainty in 1983, to ignore a radar system message that told him American missiles were incoming. He assumed correctly that the system was in error, but if he had made a different decision, the result could have been nuclear war. The incident was another illustration of how nuclear war could start by accident and misunderstanding.

These films are good introductions to the study of this chapter of 20th century history, but we still need to be critical of the perspective of these American films and imagine how Cuban or Russian historians would interpret the history fifty years later. When the events took place, America had in recent years tried to reverse the Cuban Revolution of 1959. The US had tried to assassinate Castro many times and tried to invade Cuba in the failed Bay of Pigs attack—an attack that used a secret, private army of mercenaries rather than US soldiers. In the middle of the battle, the CIA wanted President Kennedy to bring the US Air Force into it, but he refused to escalate and thus gained many enemies within the US government.

When Cuba invited the Soviet Union to place nuclear missiles on its territory, the US saw this as an unacceptable violation of the Monroe Doctrine—a policy that the US had had since the 19th century. The Monroe Doctrine was a policy that stated that no foreign power could try to have economic or military influence in any country of North or South America. The Soviet cooperation with Cuba was a historic breaking of the Monroe Doctrine. The US could not tolerate it.

Deterrence and defensive and offensive Weapons

During the missile crisis the US government had again showed an intention to invade Cuba, so Cuba had good reason to feel threatened, and the only way that such a small country could defend itself from a large, nuclear-armed threat was to get help from a strong ally and have its own nuclear deterrent. The Cubans and Soviets defined these weapons as “defensive” or a deterrent, and the Americans described their own nuclear weapons the same way. There was a general taboo against “first use” of nuclear weapons, so everyone who had them considered them to be “defensive.”

We can also ask whether it is possible to define any weapon as purely “defensive” or “not offensive.” Is a knife defensive or offensive? It depends on the intentions of the user. Thus, when the Americans asked the Soviet diplomats during the missile crisis if they had placed “offensive” weapons in Cuba, the Soviets were not lying when they said “no,” but they were being evasive. Nonetheless, they were portrayed by the Americans at the time, and in these films, as liars—as if lying were not a part of diplomacy throughout history. It seems clear that both sides were playing word games in order to maintain ambiguity about the purpose of their nuclear arsenals. It seems strange that they were not able to speak more frankly. President Kennedy could have said, for example, “We know you would consider your nuclear missiles in Cuba, if they were there, as defensive, but we would see them as also offensive weapons and we cannot accept them being so close to American territory.” That could have been a way to start negotiating a way out of the crisis in the early days of it, and it seems odd that the Kennedy brothers did not think of this approach. They didn’t use this approach because they were terrified of being seen as soft by the American public and by officials in various government agencies.

Entering the air space of an adversary

Another incident during the missile crisis was the loss of an American U2 spy plane that flew over Cuba. This happened while America had been making clear preparations for war and announcing its intent to attack Cuba. How could Cuba not see this, at this time of high tension, as an act of aggression and decide to defend itself? It was a violation of sovereign air space, and the US knew that the Cubans would shoot it down just as they knew that they would do the same to any foreign military aircraft in US airspace. However, they referred to the Cuban attack on the airplane as the first act of war. They saw it as an escalation of the conflict by the Cubans, not by the Americans. Surely, a similar act by the Soviets or Cubans at this time, for example a surveillance flight over Florida, would have been seen by America as an act of war, and the plane would have been shot down. Remarkably, in the documentary film *The Man who Saved the World*,

American filmmakers, in 2012, still referred to this incident as a Cuban act of aggression. They also described the Cubans bringing goods into their own country as “smuggling,” yet in the film it is also acknowledged that the US blockade (euphemistically described as an “embargo”) was illegal under international law. It was an act of war against Cuba, so it was wrong to describe Cubans as “smugglers.”

US missiles in Turkey

Another blind spot of many Americans, even those who say they have learned the importance of empathizing with the enemy, is that they fail to see that the Cuban Missile Crisis may never have happened if the US had not tried to invade Cuba or threatened to do so, and if the US had not placed nuclear missiles in Turkey, which were as close to the USSR as Cuba is to Florida. The crisis was resolved only when the Americans agreed to remove the missiles from Turkey and to not attack Cuba—two things which it could have done long before the crisis emerged.

There was irony in the fact that the Americans intended to remove the missiles in Turkey anyway because they were old, but they didn’t want to do it in a situation that would look like they were bending to Soviet pressure. In the final agreement, Kennedy insisted that the agreement about the missiles in Turkey be kept secret so that he wouldn’t look weak to the American public.

Worrying about re-election during an international crisis

President Kennedy faced this dilemma many times during his presidency. He had a progressive agenda, but he could not carry it out while he had to worry about getting himself and Democratic congressmen re-elected in 1964. There were also congressional elections in November 1962, just one month after the crisis. During the crisis, Kennedy was very conscious of how his handling of the crisis could affect the results of this election.

News media of the time did not mention the missiles in Turkey. They kept the secret until the 1990s. That part of the agreement was revealed only many years later. At the time, the US media portrayed the Soviets as the side that had backed down or lost in the confrontation.

Which side violated international law?

In a certain sense, the Cuban Missile Crisis was much ado about nothing. It could have been avoided. Americans still seem to have a lot of difficulty admitting their share of responsibility for it. Kennedy was seen in America as the hero who had resolved the crisis, but in other countries he was seen as the leader of the reckless fools who had caused the crisis. The inconvenient truth is that under international law, Cuba had the right to ask an ally for help, and the USSR had the right to share nuclear weapons with its ally, just as the US shared its nuclear weapons with NATO allies and Japan. Cuba was only breaking an unwritten rule about the balance of forces between the US and the USSR. There were no international laws regulating which countries could have nuclear weapons or make alliances with nuclear powers. Such international agreements came later as nations created treaties limiting the spread of nuclear weapons.

Ecological catastrophe without nuclear explosions

Another thing omitted in many historical studies is how little consideration there was of the possibility of ecological catastrophe. Even if nuclear war could be avoided, there was great risk in the plan to destroy nuclear missiles before they were loaded with nuclear warheads and launched. The Americans assumed that the nuclear warheads were not yet on the missiles, but later they learned that many of them were ready to launch. The warheads could have been destroyed without causing a nuclear explosion, but their destruction could have caused enormous amounts of plutonium to be spread over Cuba and much of the Caribbean Sea and southeast USA as well. It could have been a catastrophe of nuclear contamination without nuclear explosions, but in 1962 awareness of such environmental problems was extremely limited.

Castro's recklessness

From today's perspective, it is shocking that Castro was willing to risk this happening to his own country, and shocking that the Americans and Soviets had such disregard for the risk as well. However, Castro said afterwards that the American reaction shocked him. He had thought that once the Americans learned that Cuba had nuclear weapons, they would stop talking about invasion and stop making threats against Cuba. He had wanted the Americans to see the nuclear weapons and be deterred by them. He was surprised that they were slow to notice them, and he was shocked that the US was willing to risk nuclear war by insisting that the nuclear weapons be removed.

(You can read [this article](#) to learn what happens when an atomic bomb is accidentally destroyed in a plane crash: “Spain demands US clear earth from site of 1966 nuclear bomb mishap”).

Communication with the other side

The Soviet and American leaders had a shocking lack of ability during the crisis to communicate with each other directly. After the crisis, they fixed this problem by creating a “hotline” system. Both sides had great difficulty in understanding who was in charge during the crisis. The military commanders on both sides had their own agendas separate from the political leaders, so each side felt great confusion about what was going on in the other government. Who was really in control? Each side suspected that there might be (or might have been) a military coup d’etat that would push Kennedy or Khrushchev from power. In fact, many believe there was a coup d’etat, but it came one year later in Dallas, on November 22, 1963.

The military commanders were, in a certain sense, fighting the last war. They were slow to understand that the new situation called for new tactics and much greater caution.

Military operations far from Washington continued as if the crisis did not exist

Even during a moment of crisis, the machinery of the Cold War was still in operation. Kennedy didn’t think about cancelling a missile test and nuclear bomb test in the Pacific, or to order a stop to nuclear-armed aircraft patrols near the Russian Far East. He was shocked to find out that these routine operations were still happening during the crisis. These were further signals that made the Soviets wonder if America was out of control and unpredictable.

Game theory

Some people believed that it was good to make the enemy have such fears (it was called the madman theory of nuclear deterrence—make the enemy think that the leadership might be insane or irrational).

Cuba was given an ultimatum: withdraw the nuclear weapons before Monday or face a massive attack. Kennedy realized this was foolish, after the threat had been made, because it gave the Soviets reason to be the first to attack before Monday. Fortunately, they didn’t. The film *13 Days* shows the Kennedy brothers discussing this “game theory”

aspect of the situation, and they were fully aware of the dangerous situation their ultimatum was creating.

40 years later, what did officials say about the crisis?

Civilization “lucked out,” as Kennedy’s Defense Secretary Robert McNamara said in the film [Fog of War](#). He was shocked many years later when he learned that in October 1962 Cuba also had about one hundred small, tactical nuclear weapons that would have been used against invading US military forces in the battlefield or on the sea. The crisis made it clear that no government had figured out a way to keep a nuclear war from starting by accident, misunderstanding, minor acts of aggression, or by recklessness. The problem still exists today. The world has developed a false sense of security since the USSR broke up in the early 1990s, but the new cold war may be even more dangerous than the first one. The historian Sheldon Stern concluded in his study of the Cuban Missile Crisis (*The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory*) that it was the decision of only one man—John F. Kennedy—that stopped the plan for an invasion of Cuba, which would have led to nuclear war. Would the current US president (in 2024) be capable of wisely handling such a crisis today?

Khrushchev’s letter to Castro about the possibility of “first use”

Finally, this quote below shows that the Soviets really did intend their missiles to be defensive, or a deterrent. Like every sane leader who has ever been responsible for the control of a nuclear arsenal, Khrushchev knew that a “first strike” offensive use of nuclear missiles would produce no victory for anyone and would lead to crimes against humanity that would exceed all those committed during WWII. However, there were some military leaders and officials who thought a first strike victory would be possible, and they seemed to think that the ecological destruction and the death of millions of civilians in the USSR and in the NATO alliance would be justified.

Sheldon Stern:

“Fidel Castro had sent an emotional letter to Khrushchev, essentially arguing that the situation was deteriorating very rapidly and if Cuba was to avoid receiving the first strike, if an attack was inevitable, then the Soviet Union should instead launch an attack against the U.S. ‘It became clear to us,’ Khrushchev later wrote, ‘that Fidel totally failed to understand our purpose. We had installed the missiles not for the purpose of attacking the United States, but to keep the United States from

attacking Cuba.' He later replied to his Cuban ally, 'You propose that we be the first to carry out a nuclear strike on the territory of the enemy. You, of course, realize where that would have led. Rather than a simple strike, it would have been the start of thermonuclear world war. Dear Comrade Fidel Castro, I consider this proposal of yours incorrect, although I understand your motivation.' Castro's letter may well have influenced Khrushchev's decision to proceed with settlement with the United States."

- Sheldon M. Stern, *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory* (Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 142

The relevance of the Cuban Missile Crisis in the last decade, 2014-2024

Analysts of geopolitics noted that the Ukraine crisis is the opposite of the Cuban Missile Crisis. From 1997 to 2014, NATO expanded closer to Russia's borders and declared an intention to put NATO weapons and nuclear missiles in Ukraine. Like Kennedy in 1962, Putin declared that this policy was unacceptable and Russia would be forced to take action if the US insisted on this provocation. Unlike Khrushchev in 1962, Presidents Obama, Trump and Biden refused to negotiate a settlement of the crisis. Analysts have also noted that the US would not tolerate Russia trying to turn Mexico into a pro-Russian ally with Russian nuclear weapons placed near the US border.